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SUBJECT: TAJIK JOURNALISTS UNION SUSPENSION NOT A CRACK DOWN ON MEDIA
FREEDOM

¶1. On April 11 the Ministry of Justice announced a Dushanbe district court suspended the Union of Journalists of Tajikistan for three months. The suspension is not seen as a threat to media freedom, but rather a move by the government to oust the Union's current chairman, Hayot Davlatov.

¶2. The Union of Journalists, formed in 1959, is a pro-government Soviet relic. Davlatov, widely considered to be an "old and corrupt drunk," has been chairman of the Union for more than fifteen years. Embassy sources relay stories of how he skims money from international grants and even steals from the Union's cafeteria money. Davlatov has been inactive and ineffective as a Union leader and the government recognizes he is of no value to them. Embassy sources say that a possible candidate to replace him is Kamol Abdurahimov, editor of "Jumhuryat," the highest circulation national Tajik newspaper. [NOTE: It has high circulation because it's the newspaper of the Presidency, and government employees all over the country are required to read it. END NOTE.]

¶3. Although the change in leadership has been expected for years, the last straw, claimed the Ministry of Justice, is that Davlatov has not submitted the required annual report on the Union's activities. In February, the Ministry of Justice's Khatlon branch officially threatened to close down the Union of Journalists in the Khatlon region if it did not make organizational changes to its board of directors and founding documents delineating the board's authority.

¶4. COMMENT: Post does not view this as a crackdown on media freedom because the Union of Journalists of Tajikistan has been a government puppet organization, rather than seriously advocating for the rights of journalists. It is likely that the move is indeed aimed at removing Davlatov due to his inability to lead the organization and properly follow government orders.

It may also be the result of a personal dispute between the Khatlon Ministry of Justice and Union branch. However, the Ministry of Justice's stated reasons of failure to produce an annual report and improper organizational structure are similar to the technical reasons it gives to other public associations and NGOs it wants to shut down. It is likely the Union will resume its activities after three months with a new chairman and a new name. END COMMENT.

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